Interview with Harold C. Vedeler

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

HAROLD C. VEDELER

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Today is August 2, 1995. This is an interview with Harold C. Vedeler on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies. I am Charles Stuart Kennedy. I wonder if we could start with when and where you were born and a bit about your family.

VEDELER: Oh, I was born on July 6, 1903, in Waukon, Iowa. It's in the northeastern part of the state of Iowa. My father died when I was three years old. He was a doctor of medicine. He had tuberculosis. For his health, we moved to New Mexico. He died there. My mother brought me back to live with my grandparents. She and I lived with them in a place called “The Old Academy,” right across from the little, brown church near Nashua, Iowa.

Q: The famous “little, brown church?”

VEDELER: That's right, the “little, brown church in the vale.”

Q: There was a famous hymn, “Come to the church in the wild wood, come to the church in the vale.”

VEDELER: That's the church where I went to Sunday school.

Q: I remember hearing that hymn when I was a young boy. They used to play it on a radio program in California. I used to hear it every morning.

VEDELER: I know. Then we moved to Clear Lake, Iowa, in 1914. That's in the North Central part of Iowa. I lived there until I went to college in 1922 [at Iowa State University] in Ames, Iowa. I only went there for two quarters, enough to know that I was not meant to be an engineer. So I transferred to the State University of Iowa [in Iowa City]. I got my bachelor's degree there.

Q: What did you major in?

VEDELER: Psychology and philosophy. They were in the same department there [at the State University of Iowa]. I know that I had no course in history there. I mention that because I wasn't certain what I wanted to do when I got out of college. I didn't know for sure until two or three years later. I went to the University of Wisconsin in Madison, Wisconsin. I got a Ph.D. in European History there.

Q: Why did you change from psychology and philosophy to history?

VEDELER: Well, I always loved history but I always thought it was easy. There's no use in taking easy courses. However, I had to do something to earn a living. I liked the idea of teaching history, so that's why I went to graduate school and took a major in history there.

Q: This was mainly in European history?

VEDELER: I got my degree in modern European history. I specialized in German history and went to Germany in 1932-33 and did research in the Bavarian archives and the Bavarian State Library at Munich.

Q: That was an interesting period. What was your impression of Germany at that time? This was when Hitler took power. Now, you have a German name and you had gone to the

University of Wisconsin, which is a center for German literature and so forth. When you got to Germany, what were your impressions?

VEDELER: My name is Norwegian rather than German. A lot of the German people were desperate. They had gone through the loss of World War I, followed by the Versailles peace treaty, [the hyper] inflation in 1923. Then came the Great Depression, as the last blow. Of course, I saw a lot of the “Brown Shirts” [SA—Strum Abteilung, or “Storm Detachments”], and the various political parties in Germany. I went to hear Hitler speak. I saw him a couple of times at close range. He was as close as from here to that wall.

Q: You're talking of about 15 feet.

VEDELER: I could see what a hold he would have on these desperate people, whose pride had been wounded so severely and who had suffered financial losses. He was a very dynamic speaker—very theatrical, a great actor. He said things that appealed to them. That was how he got a hold on them. I disliked the “Brown Shirts” then and did so ever afterwards.

I stayed in a “pension” there, with a bourgeois, or middle class family. The lady of the house had to take in boarders to make ends meet. The family which owned the house was sympathetic to the Nazi cause. I wore out my welcome there before I left Germany because, when Hitler came into power [in 1933], I made no effort to hide my opinion that the Germans were making a great mistake if they went with him.

In the summer of 1932 we thought that Hitler didn't have much of a chance [of taking over the government]. It seemed that his position was getting weaker. However, by the end of 1932 his position had grown stronger. Then he and Fritz von Papen formed a coalition which got 52 percent of the vote. However, the Nazis never got a majority vote by themselves.

Q: What was there for you as a young American which "turned you off" on Hitler at that particular time?

VEDELER: I thought he was preaching the wrong course for Germany. I thought that his ideas were wrong about Aryan "superiority" and all that stuff. He sent the German Army into the Rhineland to reoccupy it in 1936. That confirmed my feeling that Hitler would be a dangerous character on the international scene.

Q: You were in Munich, in Bavaria, which was, of course, the heart of much of the National Socialist movement. What was your impression of the "Brown Shirts," the so-called "Storm Troopers"?

VEDELER: Oh, I didn't like them. My reaction to them was very negative. I attended rallies of the Socialists, the Communists, and all political parties of any size, so I had some basis for comparing the different parties. I thought that the National Socialists [Nazis] were a bad influence in Germany and would be bad for the international community.

Q: What was your impression of the Communist Party at that time?

VEDELER: They were putting up strong opposition to the Nazis, and so were the Socialists. So I had a certain amount of sympathy for them.

Q: In beer halls and at your pension did you find that people were trying to "use" you, as an American, or try to get your reactions [to what was going on]?

VEDELER: Well, not at that time. The more active the Storm Troopers were and the more they exerted their power, the more arrogant they became. That's one of the reasons that I disliked them. The Storm Troopers would shove people around and act as if they had an ordained right to control the public. They were so convinced that they belonged to a superior order of human beings.

Q: When did you leave Germany?

VEDELER: I left there in March, 1933, after Hitler had come into power. He and Von Papen had formed a cabinet in January, [1933]. Then they had elections. On March 5, 1933, they had a parade in Berlin. I was there. They were in power by that time.

Q: Then you returned to the United States?

VEDELER: I returned [to the United States] in March, 1933. I went to Germany in July, 1932.

Q: Was this part of your studies for a Ph.D. degree?

VEDELER: Yes. I went to Germany to do research on the “toleration reforms” in Germany during the Napoleonic period. However, I found that this was such a large subject that I confined it to the “toleration reforms” in Bavaria during the Napoleonic period. I did work in the State Library there in Munich, the State Archives in Munich, and in all of the provincial archives in Bavaria. I studied the original documents in German script. When I got my Ph.D. thesis finished and had my degree, I went out to teach in Idaho and continued to work on the genesis of the “toleration reforms” in Bavaria during the Napoleonic period.

Q: What were the “toleration reforms”?

VEDELER: They involved religious toleration.

Q: So it was ironic that you were looking at something that was about to undergo a tremendous change.

VEDELER: That's right. Before the French Revolution and the Napoleonic period Bavaria had been a “closed” Catholic state. By the end of the Napoleonic period various [other] religions had acquired a place in Bavaria, thanks in large part to the territorial changes expanding the size of the Bavarian state. So there was a tremendous change in the

attitude of the state and in the laws toward non-Catholic [religious] denominations. That is what I worked on.

Because of this work and my specialty in German history, I was called to the State Department in 1943.

Q: Prior to that you had been a visiting professor, working at several universities?

VEDELER: I had taught at the southern branch of the University of Idaho. This is now Idaho Southern University. I also taught at the University of Nebraska. I was brought there in 1941, where I had a position as acting Professor. I also taught at the University of Wisconsin during that period before I came to [the State Department].

Q: During this period of 10 years between 1933 and 1943 you were basically teaching in the Mid-west about Germany.

VEDELER: I taught at three universities—University of Idaho, University of Nebraska, and the University of Wisconsin.

Q: This area [in the Mid West] has a large German community. My family on my mother's side was named Lackner. They came from Chicago and Wisconsin. They spoke German before they spoke English. Did you find that there was much understanding of what was going on in Germany? You had seen the birth of the Hitler epoch. Did you find that you had a "cause" to preach, in a way, about what was happening [in Germany].

VEDELER: Well, I was sure that the Nazis were a menace, not only to Germany, but to other countries as well. I was afraid that war was going to come, though I didn't know when it was going to come. I certainly didn't hide my opinion that the Third Reich and Nazism were bad for the world.

Q: World War II started for the United States in 1941. How did you end up in the State Department?

VEDELER: Just let me mention one thing about my point of view. We had a man come out to the University of Idaho, Southern Branch, by the name of Jonas. He was sort of favorably disposed toward the Nazis. He and I had a conflict of opinion—that shows my attitude. I was brought to the State Department because of my study of the “toleration reforms” in Bavaria. I had spoken at a convention of the Pacific Historical Association about these reforms. I had published an article [on this subject] in the “Journal of Modern History”—the main article in one issue. So the professional historians knew that I was a specialist in German history. For that reason I was brought to the State Department when they were assembling a group of professors to work on papers for the post-war settlement. These were called “policy and analysis papers.”

Along with many other professors and teachers I came to the State Department in 1943. Some of them had come earlier.

Q: By that time I suppose that you could say that the war was taking a more favorable course. We certainly hadn't invaded the mainland [of Europe], but things were looking up a bit in North Africa and we were moving into Italy. There was a feeling that the war was going to come out “all right.” Was there any particular “thrust” that you were getting from the State Department about what they thought that we should do with Germany after World War II?

VEDELER: That's what we worked on. We prepared all of these papers concerning proposals for dealing with Germany. I remember that I did a lengthy paper on “Denazification” and tried to identify the various categories of Nazis—where you should put the emphasis on getting them out of office and punishing them. That was one example.

Let me say that we had one division when I went [to the State Department] dealing with these studies for the post-war settlement. Then this was split into two divisions—one called the “Division of Territorial and Political Studies,” and the other, the “Division on the United Nations Organization.” I worked in the first of those two divisions. A lot of these studies were territorial—where you would draw boundaries, what you would do with the Germans in Czechoslovakia, and all that sort of thing.

Q: The “Sudetendeutsche,” and all of that?

VEDELER: The Sudeten Germans and where the boundaries should be between Poland and Germany and Czechoslovakia and Germany.

Q: Was there any thought, while you were doing [these studies] that many of the boundaries might be set up by the Soviet Army, or were we thinking in terms of how Europe might look in terms of how the front lines might end up at the end of the war?

VEDELER: We worked on a paper demarcating zones of occupation in Germany for the Allied Powers. On that basis agreement was reached with the Russians before the end of hostilities on the occupation of Germany through four zones. It was not anticipated nor intended that these zones should set long-term political boundaries.

Q: While you were doing this, did the “Morgenthau Plan” come up, which basically involved turning Germany into an agricultural state?

VEDELER: Oh, yes, there was a lot of attention given to the “Morgenthau Plan.” We in the State Department were opposed to it.

Q: Morgenthau was Secretary of the Treasury at the time.

VEDELER: Yes. We tried to resist the Morgenthau proposals for dealing with Germany.

Q: What was the feeling in the Department? Was it felt that these proposals weren't practical, that they wouldn't work, or...

VEDELER: Well, we thought that they were too severe, for one thing. It's hard for me to look back now and see what the reaction was, except that the people in the State Department considered [these proposals] too severe by far and might create a reaction which we wouldn't want to see.

Q: As you were doing this, particularly in view of your experience in Germany, was the relatively harsh Treaty of Versailles [after World War I] hanging over you, that [the Treaty of Versailles] was the germ of what turned out to be [one cause] for the rise of Nazism? In other words, if you asked for peace terms that were too harsh, you might just be setting the stage for the next world war?

VEDELER: There was some thought along that line. When we prepared all of these papers, the American Government in general—and the State Department in particular—envisaged, at the end of World War II, a big international conference like the Congress of Vienna or the Versailles Conference at the end of World War I. [It was anticipated] that we would draw up one treaty which would govern the whole of the post-war settlement. However, it didn't work out that way. As you know, there was a number of different conferences which drew up the treaties and agreements.

Q: World War II in Germany was over in the spring of 1945. What happened to the post-war planners [you were working with]? Did the State Department say, "Thank you very much, and now go home?"

VEDELER: A lot of the professors went back to their respective universities, but some of us stayed in the State Department and were taken into the old-line divisions [of the Department]. Like myself—I entered the Division of Central European Affairs, which at that time dealt with Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Austria. That happened in 1945. About the

time that President Roosevelt died [April, 1945] I went over to the old State Department Building to the old-line political division mentioned. We had finished our special work then.

Q: What was your impression of the State Department in the spring of 1945 as a place to work and of the people there?

VEDELER: I thought that it was very interesting indeed, and that was one of the main reasons that I stayed there. The atmosphere in the Division of Central European Affairs was congenial, and its chief, Jimmy Riddleberger, a fine officer to work with, welcomed us (myself and two other university historians from Territorial and Political Studies). I had had a taste of history in the making and found the work interesting. I had been engaged in it for two years and I decided I wanted to continue in that line of work. Yet it was a difficult decision to reach, for I loved teaching European history in the universities, and Nebraska had offered me a full professorship to return.

Q: Were we making any decisions about, for example, the Sudeten Germans and what was going to happen to them? What was done about them, both in terms of planning [during the war] and in the aftermath of the war? How did we view those people? In a way they had been at least an excuse for Hitler to take over Czechoslovakia.

VEDELER: The problem then involved justice and for them to be returned to Germany, since they had played such a part in the Nazi takeover of Czechoslovakia. We felt that they should be sent back to Germany and the land [which they had occupied] should be freed for [the use of] Czechoslovakia.

Q: Of course, we had a military occupation [of Germany], and the military were running things. In Japan, when General MacArthur took over [as the Supreme Commander, Allied Powers—SCAP], he basically cut out [any role for] the Department of State. He cut out everybody. MacArthur was running everything with his own people and would take no

direction from anybody. What about Germany? What was your view of the role of the Department of State at this time?

VEDELER: The [U.S.] Army had political advisers from the State Department. Ambassador Robert Murphy was there, as you may remember, as was Jake Beam. I think that they had an influential role to play regarding what was done in Germany after the end of hostilities. As time went on after the fall of Germany, the [U.S.] Army became more and more independent in the policy they followed in dealing with Germany.

Q: Did you and others have a chance to get over to Germany and other areas nearby and see what was happening?

VEDELER: I was in Germany for four months. I went over in August, 1945, and was there until December, 1945. The State Department sent over a team to interrogate the Germans concerned with the foreign policy of the Third Reich. During the time I was there, my main subject was how Paul Schmidt, who was the interpreter for the German Foreign Office during the Weimar period in Germany and then for Hitler's government and Hitler personally, after the Nazis came into power. He was a very interesting man and very capable, of course. He was extremely fluent in both English and French. He could speak in either of those languages nearly as well as he could in German, his native tongue. Schmidt had done a Ph.D. thesis in England on Oliver Goldsmith.

Not only had Paul Schmidt been an interpreter for Hitler, but he had attended the big international meetings or conferences which Hitler had participated in with various foreign rulers. He would be the secretary taking notes at the same time that he was interpreting. We had already captured long records of these meetings which Schmidt had prepared. I had copies of those memoranda when I interrogated Schmidt. I worked for a whole week with him at a camp near Frankfurt, called Oberursel. The irony was that Schmidt had interrogated Prisoners of War from our Air Force in that same camp!

He had a great sense of irony. He was not a Nazi in any real sense but only in a formal way. He was kind of a bystander, watching affairs as if they were on a stage and taking a very objective view of things. Long before the end of the war he was convinced that Germany was headed for destruction.

Q: When you returned to the State Department after spending four months in Germany in the immediate aftermath of the war, what was your impression of where Germany was going at that time? What did you think was going to happen to Germany?

VEDELER: I had seen what a great plight the German people were in at the end of the war. Many of them depended for survival on food shipments from relatives and friends or trading family treasures for food. They had no gasoline to speak of. They had rigged up little contrivances using [gas derived from burning] wood to drive their vehicles. Wood was the source of fuel. The Germans were in a very serious plight then, but they have a great capacity for resilience. I know that there were people then in the American Army who were very anti-German. Not just anti-Nazi, but anti-German. Some, however, thought that we had fought the wrong country. Even then, as I remember distinctly, there were some who thought that we should have been fighting the Russians, and not the Germans.

Q: Did you have any opportunity to see what the Russians were doing in "their" part of Germany?

VEDELER: Not at first hand. The Soviets also occupied a zone in Austria, of course. For some years I worked on the preparation and negotiation of the State treaty with Austria. We knew, of course, that the Russians were carting off [to the Soviet Union] all that they could get their hands on from their Zones of Occupation in Germany and Austria.

We could see how badly they were treating the people in each country immediately after the end of hostilities. As time went on, the way they dealt with the people in their zone in Austria compared so unfavorably with how the Western powers were dealing with the

Austrian population that the Russians were finally prepared to enter into a treaty with Austria that would end its occupation. Ultimately, they agreed to the Austrian State treaty, as it was called. The negotiation of that treaty was a diplomatic marathon which lasted until 1955.

Q: Let's go back a bit. You came back from Germany in December, 1945, and were working in the Division in the State Department which dealt with Central Europe.

VEDELER: That's right.

Q: This Division concerned Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. This was a tumultuous time in Czechoslovakia, up through 1948, when the Communists took over the country. Did we see this coming? Prior to 1948 you were dealing with Central Europe where the Soviet Union and the United States were sort of confronting each other. From your perspective, did the State Department see the Soviet Union as a potential enemy or a threat at that time?

VEDELER: By 1946 it was already clear that we were going to have great problems with the Soviet Union. That was the time when the Soviet Union prevented Poland and Czechoslovakia from entering the Marshall Plan. I think that that was the real beginning of the discernment that the Soviet Union was really going to be difficult to deal with. I don't think that there was any conception, generally speaking, that there would be a Cold War which would last as long as proved to be the case. There may have been some Soviet specialists [in the State Department] who may have seen farther than any of the rest of us about what might develop with the Soviet Union.

Q: Regarding Czechoslovakia, there was basically a coup d'etat, and then there were elections and the Communists took over the country in February, 1948.

VEDELER: That's right. It was early in 1948.

Q: Did the State Department follow this situation very closely and was there much concern about it?

VEDELER: Well, we followed the situation closely, but, as I remember it, there was no anticipation that the Communists were going to take over Czechoslovakia at the time they did. Ambassador Steinhardt, our chief of mission at our Embassy in Prague who was in Washington at the time of the coup, was optimistic that the democratic parties in Czechoslovakia would win the elections and put down the Communists. The charg# d'affaires in Prague had a similar view. Indeed, it was this prospect, we concluded afterwards, that impelled the Communists in concert with Moscow to take over power.

Q: How heavily did our concern about Czechoslovakia weigh in the Department of State? Was Czechoslovakia considered an important country?

VEDELER: After the Communists took over Czechoslovakia in 1948, we were beginning to have a clearer perception of what the long-range problem of dealing with Communism would be. The Department broke up the Division of Central European Affairs. For a time it was uncertain where Austria and Czechoslovakia would be in the structure of the Department. Then Czechoslovakia was shifted to the Division of Eastern European Affairs, and a separate Office of German Affairs was set up. The conduct of Austrian affaires was then shifted to the Division of Southern European Affairs.

Q: Which division did you stay in?

VEDELER: I stayed with Czechoslovakia and went into the Division of Eastern European Affairs.

Q: Within the State Department there must have been a cadre of people who had been dealing with Eastern Europe in one form or another, going back to the 1930's. Did you find that there were differences of view among these people? Were some of them taking a

very hard, anti-Communist line, while others, you might say, took a more "accommodating line"? Were there differences of outlook within the Department?

VEDELER: I think that by the time the Communists took over Czechoslovakia and other Eastern European countries there was a pretty unified position in the State Department opposing the expansion of Communism and the influence of Communist regimes. I don't recall any differences of opinion in that regard.

Q: There had been an effort during the war, particularly on the part of Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, of getting rid of some of the "hard line" anti-Communists in the State Department, because we were trying to be more accommodating to the Soviets. I was wondering whether there were any lingering after effects of that.

VEDELER: Not that I recall or noticed.

Q: Then you concentrated on Czechoslovakia for some time.

VEDELER: That's right—Czechoslovakia in the Division of Eastern European Affairs. But soon I was dealing with Poland and the Baltic countries, too.

Q: What were our concerns at this time, in the later 1940's about Poland and the Baltic countries? Obviously, the Soviet Army had entered the area and wasn't going to leave. What were the major things that you were concerned with?

VEDELER: In those Eastern European countries we were always trying to find a way to get to the people, to keep them in touch with the West even in the isolation imposed by the Communists, and to exert the influence of the democratic West on the people themselves. For example, we tried to leave magazines throughout Czechoslovakia. I went there later, you know, as DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission]. We developed Radio Free Europe as another means of access to the people there—any way that we could, when

we saw that this was going to be a long run proposition. We tried to exert influence on the people through the various channels that we could develop.

When I went to Czechoslovakia as DCM...

Q: This would have been in about...

VEDELER: 1955. We had tables out in the Embassy grounds full of magazines. People could come there and pick them up. They were much desired. We did this for some time. Then the Czechoslovak government forced us to stop that. Still, we found ways to spread magazines throughout the country. Whenever we took a trip and stayed at a hotel, we'd leave a pile of magazines.

I remember that we had a big celebration of Washington's birthday [February 22], when the Embassy [in Prague] was closed. We went up to a little resort town in the northern mountains of Czechoslovakia and stayed there for a couple of days. We took a car full of magazines and left them all over the place. That's the way we did it. Wherever we went, we'd leave magazines.

Another thing we did was to bring in a [theater company]. A company putting on “Porgy and Bess” came to Prague in December, 1955. This made a strong impression on the local population. We had a big party at the ambassador's residence afterwards and invited all of the Czechs that we were in contact with to that party. It lasted until 6:00 AM. That was another way we had of trying to maintain contact with the people and influence them in a democratic direction—to show how well things were going in the West, compared to how the Czech people were suffering under Communism.

Q: Going back to the period before you went out to Czechoslovakia, was there really any feeling that we could “do business” with the Communist governments in Poland or Czechoslovakia? Did you feel that these were very difficult governments to deal with?

VEDELER: We had to have diplomatic relations with them. There was no point in breaking off diplomatic relations. That would have cut off a channel we had in those countries. We wanted to maintain a diplomatic staff in those countries. We didn't like it when they declared anyone on our staff “PNG” [persona non grata—unwelcome].

It was always difficult to deal with the governments of these countries. However, we still wanted to continue relations with them. We also had some difficult problems to settle with them.

Q: You were trying to obtain compensation for the property of American citizens which had been nationalized.

VEDELER: When I was there in Czechoslovakia as DCM, I carried on negotiations on this subject for two years, trying to advance the possibility of a settlement for those whose property had been taken by the Czech government.

Later, when I was in the State Department after my tour in Prague as DCM, we dealt with the Romanians and Bulgarians on the same subject and obtained settlements. It was one of the principal problems we had with these countries of Eastern Europe.

Q: I believe that it was a long time before we were able to resolve this problem. We would not send Social Security pensions and things like that until we reached a settlement on these matters. However, we eventually reached a settlement.

You said that you were involved with the longstanding negotiations leading to the Austrian peace treaty. How did that work out and what were you doing?

VEDELER: First of all, Francis Williamson and I prepared the original proposals in the State Department in the form of a draft treaty. Other offices in the Department and in other agencies contributed their input, and the draft was thoroughly reworked to serve as our working text in the negotiations. Francis went to London as a political adviser for the

opening of negotiations on this treaty. [Later on], I went to Moscow as a political adviser to General Mark Clark, who was High Commissioner for the United States in Austria. He was in charge of the U. S. delegation to negotiate the Austrian treaty. I spent two months there, working on the Austrian treaty and in negotiating with the Soviets. Of course, the British and the French were also involved [in these negotiations].

After that I went to the Embassy in London and spent a couple of months working on the Austrian treaty. After returning, I was no longer dealing with Austria but was working on Czechoslovakia and other Eastern European countries.

Q: What was your impression of General Mark Clark at that time. He was known as a rather imperious general during World War II. How did you find working with him at this point?

VEDELER: I got along all right with him, although he was difficult to deal with. Francis Williamson had had trouble with him in London. That's one reason why I took Francis' place and went to Moscow [for the Austrian treaty negotiations]. Sometimes he was a little imperious and brusque, but I found him in the end to be reasonable and to have Austria's interests very much at heart. I really got along with him quite well.

Q: As you were working on the Austrian treaty, did we have the feeling that this negotiation was really going to work? Did you think that the Soviets were really interested in doing something at that time?

VEDELER: There were some articles in the treaty which we could negotiate without much difficulty. However, other articles involving Soviet military interests were a different matter. I remember that we had the feeling that the Soviet military were holding up the completion of the negotiations on some of these articles. We certainly aimed at getting a treaty that would work and thought that we would, in time.

Q: Was it generally agreed on the American side that we would settle for a "neutral" Austria?

VEDELER: I think so. I don't really recall any opposition [to that idea], although at first we directed our efforts to obtaining a status for Austria as a liberated state comparable to that of Italy. We were so anxious to get the Soviets out of Austria that we worked hard to complete the negotiations on this treaty. I think there were several factors which contributed to completing the negotiations on that treaty.

One was the fact, as I suggested before, that the Soviets were showing up in a very poor light in their zone of occupation. They were failing, not only in the view of the Austrians, but on the world stage as well in dealing with the Austrians, compared to the way that the three Western powers were managing their zones of occupation. Secondly, our "friend" who came over here and pounded his shoe...

Q: Khrushchev.

VEDELER: Khrushchev came into power about that time. He was more disposed to dealing with the West than his predecessors had been. Thirdly, Austria was not of such great importance to the Soviets as Germany was. They could afford to give up their position in Austria, whereas they [evidently felt that they] couldn't do so in Germany.

Q: What about the Baltic countries—Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania? This was part of your responsibility. They had been "engulfed" by the Soviet Union [in 1940], although we had never recognized that. What was the feeling in the State Department. Did we ever think that the Soviets would let these countries go or not?

VEDELER: Oh, I think that the feeling was that the day would come when they would be free of the Soviet Union. I remember talking to a group of people who dealt with the Baltic countries up in New York on the VOA [Voice of America]. I expressed my conviction that the day would come when Lithuania would be free and that they should have faith in

that. If we hadn't felt that, we would not have maintained this policy of not recognizing the incorporation of the Baltic countries into the Soviet Union. That was one of the tenets of our policy in dealing with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe: never to recognize the incorporation of the Baltic countries into the Soviet Union. We always maintained that these “captive nations” would again be independent one day.

Q: Were there any people in the State Department who said, “Let's be realistic. These countries are gone, and let's forget about them.” Was there any of that?

VEDELER: Not that I know of. You know, these countries had funds that we had blocked. Their [diplomatic] missions in the United States were maintained with those blocked funds. We supervised the use of those funds.

Q: You had been in the Civil Service. Is that right?

VEDELER: I entered the State Department as a civil servant.

Q: Then the Wriston program came along.

VEDELER: That's when I entered the Foreign Service.

Q: In 1955.

VEDELER: I think that it was then. It was 1954 or 1955. It took quite a while, I remember.

Q: You said that you were assigned to the Embassy in Prague [in 1955]. Who was our Ambassador there at that time?

VEDELER: U. Alexis Johnson.

Q: How did you find working with him?

VEDELER: Just fine. We got along very well and had an excellent relationship. He and I would meet from time to time in the library of his residence for evening cocktails and discussion of affairs at the Embassy and in Prague.

Q: He was more of a Japanese specialist, wasn't he?

VEDELER: A Far Eastern specialist, yes.

Q: What was his reaction to the Czech government at that time?

VEDELER: He carried on his diplomatic functions there as chief of mission. A good deal of his time was devoted to negotiations with the Chinese [Communists] in [Geneva], Switzerland, trying to get American prisoners free. For much of this time I was in charge of the Embassy in his absence. He didn't do anything in “frontal opposition” to the regime [in Czechoslovakia]. He maintained a formal diplomatic position, as any ambassador would in any country. Of course, he was opposed to Communism in every way, as all of us were, and vigorously supported our efforts to maintain contact and influence with the people of Czechoslovakia. Of course, he encouraged the exercise of caution since there was always risk of a contact being an agent of the secret police, seeking to entrap us.

Q: You were in Czechoslovakia from 1955 to 1957. What was your impression of the situation there? How did you regard the Czech government?

VEDELER: I could see how unpopular the Communist regime was with many of the people there. I could see what a bad job they were doing, economically speaking. There was so little electricity there that at night the lights were dim when you would drive around Prague. There was very little produce in the markets. We couldn't buy anything to speak of. We had to get our supplies in from Germany. We brought in a truck [of supplies] every month or two months. The truck was loaded with supplies for the whole Embassy staff. In our own

house, the residence of the DCM, we had an inventory of $1500 worth of supplies which we always kept.

There were [local employees] of the Embassy staff who [worked for] the secret police. We knew that some of the local staff were secret police agents. We weren't sure about some of the others, and some, we were sure, were not secret police agents at all. We knew that, at times, they would have to act as secret police informants. They would go along with the secret police to the extent that they had to, and no more.

Q: You were there [in Prague] at a very important time, November, 1956, at the time of the Hungarian revolt. Can you talk about your experiences at that time?

VEDELER: Well, there were some people who said that the same thing could happen in Czechoslovakia. They packed their bags in readiness to go to the border, if there were any chance to do so. That was the case of the family that worked for us in our house.

Q: What were we doing at our Embassy at this time?

VEDELER: We were trying to find out what was happening in Hungary and what might be the possibility of its occurring in Czechoslovakia. We tried to report on opinion in Czechoslovakia at that time and report whatever pertinent information other Western diplomats managed to obtain.

Q: Did you notice any extraordinary security precautions being taken in Czechoslovakia at that time?

VEDELER: Not any more so than usual in overt actions. The secret police were everywhere, all the time, anyway, in the city of Prague itself. They were often very much in evidence. For example, just before the musical, “Porgy and Bess,” came to town, the secret police put on a campaign of strictly watching all of the [official] Americans, wherever

they went, except for the Ambassador. They followed us around—and obviously so. They kept watch on us where we lived, day and night. This campaign went on for about a week.

For example, I went to a French exhibition of drawings located in a Czech building. I drove down in an Embassy car, got out, and went in. There was a secret police car right behind me. I went into the building and walked around. Right behind me, like a shadow, was a secret police officer, wearing one of those leather coats. They wore leather coats as a matter of dress. To this day I hate to see leather coats! That's an indication of the kind of surveillance which the secret police maintained on the people. They didn't want any contact between the people and U.S. Embassy officers. Of course, we tried to have contact with the people to get their views and report on them.

Whenever we talked over the telephone, we had to exercise the utmost caution because the phones were probably being tapped. If we needed to make sure a conversation with another Embassy officer would not be overheard, we talked outside buildings or in the security room of the Embassy. We found “bugs” [listening devices] in the attic of our Embassy. The secret police had rigged up a whole system of bugs from a building which had a wall next to the wall of our Embassy. They had bored a hole through the walls of both buildings and then worked in the attic to install this system going down into the ceiling of the rooms below the attic floor. Then they put in a kind of “plug” where they had made an opening to get in. We only found out about this when the Department sent out officers from the Office of Security to see what bugs they could find. The man who discovered the hole in the ceiling was lying on a bed in one of the apartments to inspect the ceiling. He looked up very carefully all over the ceiling—and then he saw the tiny opening of the place where the bug was installed. Then we went up to the attic and found the whole system, where it came from, and where it went to an adjoining wall.

Q: As DCM you were responsible for running the Embassy. Was there a problem there, with the Czechs trying to “compromise” our people? Traditionally, they used “sex traps,” black mail, and all of that.

VEDELER: Yes, they were always trying to do that, one way or another. One of their favorite ways was to have somebody approach us and try to give information. We always had the problem of trying to determine what was genuine in any approach to us or any relationship with a local person and what was the setup of the secret police. That was an eternal problem, because we had to try to collect information from the people to report to the Department.

I remember one case in particular. An Embassy economic reporting officer had developed a contact who was in touch with the secret police. They caught him in a meeting with this secret agent as the latter passed information to our officer. Our officer was declared “PNG” and had to leave the country. That is what they tried to do whenever they could. Again a police agent seduced one of the Embassy's clerical secretaries by worming his way into her affections from the posed position as a driving trainer and then attempted to control her as an informant in place.

Whenever the Air and Army attach#s went on a trip, the secret police would try to follow them. I remember going on a trip with our agricultural affairs officer. The secret police had five cars traveling with us. There was one car in front of us and one behind—and one on each side on parallel roads. And they also had another one, for a total of five secret police cars keeping tabs on us.

Q: You left Prague in 1957. It must have been a difficult tour, with all of this security attention.

VEDELER: Yes, it was. Especially in view of the Hungarian revolt. I think that that event scared the Czechoslovak regime. They were very alert to any sign of something similar happening in Czechoslovakia. They took special precautions in dealing with all of the Western Embassies and their representatives. It was a difficult time right at the height of Communist control over Eastern Europe. I think that the control tightened everywhere in Eastern Europe, after the Hungarian Revolt.

Q: Then you moved to Vienna in 1957?

VEDELER: That's right.

Q: What were you doing there?

VEDELER: I was Deputy U. S. Representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA].

Q: You were there for two years, until 1959.

VEDELER: That's right.

Q: What were you doing during this 1957-1959 period at the IAEA?

VEDELER: During that time the International Atomic Energy Agency was established. The various national missions to that agency held meetings with each other and as a board. Those board meetings may have been held once a month and may have been less frequent than that. I often represented the United States at the board meetings. Once a year we had a General Conference [of the agency]. A delegation would come out from Washington, with representatives from the Atomic Energy Agency and the State Department.

There was a U.S. Representative to the agency. [During my time at the IAEA] he was a newspaperman, a political activist from New Mexico. He didn't live in Vienna. He generally just came for the annual General Conference.

Q: Was there much activity in the IAEA during the time that you were there, or would you say that this was pretty much a "holding action" during this period from 1957 to 1959?

VEDELER: So much of this activity of the IAEA and the missions accredited to it was concerned with technical matters and administrative matters within the agency. It was a

time when all concerned were busy in shaping the structure and functions of a new UN organization. There was, of course, some politics involved in appointments there—to make sure that the Communists didn't get too much influence in the agency. There was always the background of a difference of political interest between the Soviet Union and other Communist countries and the non-Communist countries.

Q: Did you have many dealings with the Soviet side—personally and otherwise?

VEDELER: Oh, yes, we did. We got along pretty well with them in dealing with the specific problems of that organization.

Q: When I have talked with others who have dealt with the Soviets in this area, many of them have said that, really, American and Soviet policy were pretty much parallel in the atomic energy field—mainly to keep other powers from developing atomic weapons.

VEDELER: Yes, we had some identity of interest in that field and also in promoting and safeguarding the peaceful uses of atomic energy. We often had differences about appointments [to various positions in the agency]. However, on the whole we got along pretty well in that particular area. There was a Deputy Representative from the Soviet Union with whom I frequently dealt. We had excellent personal relations. He had served in New York in the Soviet Delegation to the UN. He had come under American influence [to some extent]. I was sure that this man, at heart, was not a real Communist. He was a career officer. He was doing everything possible to [support Soviet policy] in the interest of career and status. However, he had been deeply influenced by this assignment to the United States. We entertained each other at dinner and so on. In dealing with the officials of Communist states, I tried to act in a thoroughly professional and generally in a personally friendly way.

Q: Well, you left Vienna and went back to the Department in 1959?

VEDELER: That's right, to the Office of Eastern European Affairs.

Q: You stayed there until you retired?

VEDELER: That's right—for six years [until 1965].

Q: Who was the head of European affairs at that time? Do you remember the names of some of the people?

VEDELER: Foy Kohler at first, but William Tyler was the head [of the bureau] during most of that time.

Q: He was really a Western European specialist, wasn't he? I think that he had served in France and Germany.

VEDELER: Yes, I think that he had mostly dealt with Western Europe.

Q: During this period from 1959 to 1965 what were your main concerns? For one thing you were there [in the Office of Eastern European Affairs] during the missile crisis [of 1962] with the Soviet Union over Cuba. Did that have any effect on Central Europe?

VEDELER: I remember that during the missile crisis I was in Eastern Europe, visiting all of the posts that I dealt with. I was in Warsaw at the height of the crisis. From there I was scheduled to go to another Eastern European country. I had to telephone the State Department to see what I should do. I recall that the officers assigned to the Embassy in Warsaw were pretty edgy at that time.

Q: Did the Office of Eastern European Affairs include Yugoslavia at that time?

VEDELER: Yes.

Q: What were the countries where we felt that we might make some ground and gradually wean some of them away from the Soviets? Or did we see any such prospect?

VEDELER: We did everything that we could to encourage Yugoslavia to be independent of the Soviet Union. That was the pivot of our policy in dealing with Eastern Europe. As I recall, we didn't see much hope for any Eastern European country to become another Yugoslavia, though we tried to encourage them as much as we could to show some independence [from the Soviet Union], as in the case of Poland. I think that that was a pretty realistic estimate of what might be done and what couldn't be done at that time.

Q: What about Poland? Of all of the Eastern European countries the Soviets never seemed to have gotten a tight grip on Poland, as they did in Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and other countries. The Catholic Church was always there and was always powerful. Did you have the feeling that Poland was different, somehow?

VEDELER: Yes. Poland was different in this respect. There was a more unified population there in their attitudes because the Catholic Church was so important in the lives of the people. About 95 percent of the Polish people were Catholics, and the Catholic hierarchy in Poland had a great hold on the people. The hierarchy, from priests to the senior Archbishop, was nearly 100 percent anti-Communist. As a result, the situation in Poland was quite different from that in almost any other Eastern European country. There was always a strong base there for opposition to Communism. We were sure that many people in Poland were only Communists in form or for career or job-related reasons.

Q: What about Yugoslavia? How did we regard Marshal Tito and his government at that time?

VEDELER: We thought that he had held his country together during and after World War II. Keeping his country unified and on an independent course was a remarkable feat on Tito's part.

I don't think that anyone in the Department anticipated that Yugoslavia would disintegrate, even after Tito was gone.

Q: I was in Yugoslavia at the time of Tito's death. [In our Embassy] we thought that the Yugoslavs were too smart [to let the country disintegrate]. We're talking now about the situation in 1995 and the terrible war which has led to the breakup of the country. It's a great tragedy.

VEDELER: I wasn't in the Department during the period after the Soviet Union broke up. However, when I was in the Department, there was no anticipation that, after Tito was gone, Yugoslavia would break up.

Q: You retired in 1965?

VEDELER: That's right.

Q: I don't know if there's anything else that I should cover or not. Were there any other developments when you were working on Central European affairs that you would like to discuss?

VEDELER: I might mention that during the time that I was in Czechoslovakia [1955-1957], I made a trip to [southern] Poland, to Krakow. It's an attractive town, one of the most interesting in Europe in the survival of its old picturesque structures. This trip was purely for sightseeing. We watched a parade on a Polish holiday. We felt then the sense of solidarity there among the people. It was impressive.

Perhaps the most striking thing during this whole period was the revolt in Hungary [1956] and the effect it had on Soviet policy. It made [the Soviet leaders] “tighten the clamps” on the Eastern European countries.

After I left the Department, there was this Soviet movement into Czechoslovakia to oppose “socialism with a human face.”

Q: That happened in the spring of 1968—the “Prague Spring.”

VEDELER: Yes. I think that the Hungarian Revolt [of 1956] and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia [in 1968] were two of the most important developments, if not the most important of all, in Eastern Europe during the period from 1946 to 1989.

Q: Well, I'd like to thank you very much.

VEDELER: You're welcome.

End of interview